Arts Management Quarterly
No. 130 | January 2019

State of the Arts

Cultural Leadership

Everbody's talking about it. Yet there is no common understanding on the concept of Cultural Leadership. And that's a good thing!
Focus starting on page 6

Cultural Leadership as Stewardship

A qualitative study on Cultural Leadership in the Scottish performing arts sector in Scotland

By Aleksandra Webb

Leadership is often defined as the ability of an individual leader to inspire, influence and make a lasting-change (Jackson & Parry 2011). Researchers and practitioners agree that a leaders' job, regardless of any industrial/ organisational differences, is to express a clear vision, devise strategies and guide their organisations into preferred futures. While the mainstream management literature offers insights on specific motivations, qualities and attributes of leaders, little is known about who cultural leaders are and what constitutes cultural leadership. This paper aims to contribute to a debate by presenting the qualitative evidence from 21 experienced cultural leaders working in the performing arts sector in Scotland.

The Scottish performing arts sector includes over 210 performing arts organisations and practitioners, ranging from individual artists and producers, small-scale companies, through to large venues and National Performing Companies (NPC) (FST 2018). Scotland has five NPCs, which receive guaranteed annual funding of £23mln with additional touring fund (Scottish Government 2018). All other performing arts organisations are supported by a range of funding programmes that include regular 3-year funding, funding for short projects, and a targeted funding administered by the national agency with an annual budget of £74mln for all arts genres and across 32 local authority areas (Creative Scotland 2017).

The motivations for work in the arts sector and a deeply internalised professional role expressed by cultural leaders affirm the importance of cultural leaders' values, beliefs and commitment, and showcase the view of cultural leadership as stewardship (Webb 2015). This notion of 'cultural stewardship'

is relatively new and not yet widely discussed. It can be understood as set of four distinctive roles enacted by cultural leaders across the sector (figure 1):

1. Parental Figure
2. Guardian
3. Change-Maker
4. and Advocate

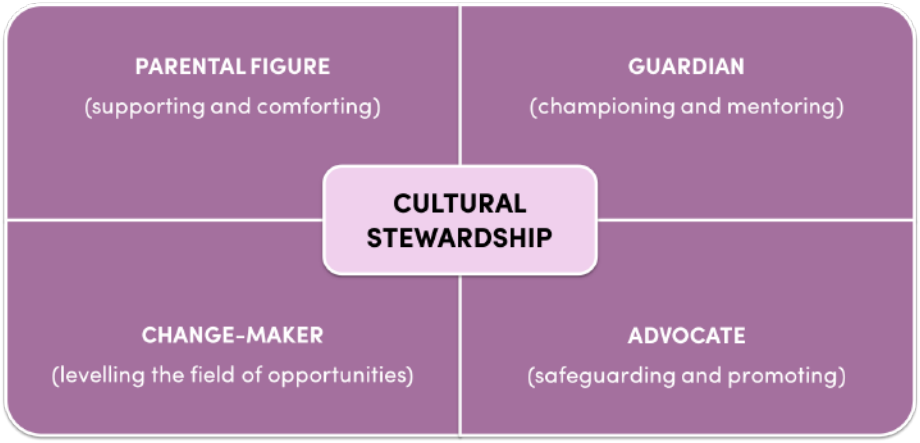

Figure 1: Four Dimensions of cultural stewardship (Source: Author)

These roles are underpinned by strong intrinsic motivation, and deep appreciation for arts practices and their socio-cultural value. Cultural stewardship denotes leadership practice by entwining artistic responsibility with the moral call to simultaneously serve as a protector of artists' livelihoods/the sustainability of the sector, and as a creator of opportunities for audience participation and enjoyment.

Being 'a good Cultural Leader'

Cultural leaders interviewed for this study were asked to describe their work roles, perceived motivations and responsibilities. Despite a diversity of roles and idiosyncrasies in career backgrounds, they displayed many commonalities in their work experiences and perceptions of their key areas of professional responsibilities. This section presents these emerged commonalities as a distinctive collective voice of what it means to be a good leader in the cultural sector. A few quotations will illustrate two of the dimensions of the cultural stewardship narrative: *a parental figure* and a *guardian*.

Parental Figure

While the intrinsic motivations of artists and creative workers, are widely acknowledged, cultural leaders themselves are rarely portrayed in the same way. Yet, leaders working in dance and theatre organisations in Scotland perceived their professional role to be concerned foremost with the current and the future 'well-being' of the arts sector referred to as 'arts ecology'. This suggests that the responsibility of leaders seems to have a clear aim in ensuring the development of provisions and support opportunities for creative workers and their artistic work, which can be then appreciated by different audiences across society. Individual leaders' responsibility appeared to be awakened by concerns in relation to the 'well-being' of artists, staff, and all other collaborators. For example, Craig said:

> *"Unlike a lot of other ecologies this one is fundamentally about humans interacting with humans, rather than different organisms (…). If you are working in the arts ecology and you care about it, then you have responsibility for it because the actions you'll take will have an impact and repercussions."*

These concerns seemed to be mobilised by a deep care for the sector they all are committed to and admitted to love. For example, Kelly expressed such commitment to the cultural sector, which she called her "*personal ecology*" and "*work family*", towards which she felt she had a duty to fulfil. The care for people and personal relationships developed constituted a part of her work identity thus stopped her from seeking work out with the cultural sector. Also Brian presented himself as a leader who cares and who has a responsibility for the members of his company - he said:

> *"We all look after each other (…) we cry together, laugh together, and as it happens, we work together. They respect me, what I am about, what my work is about, and I do for them everything beyond the mere responsibility of an artistic director or somebody who runs a company."*

Also for Brian the company represents a family, and this means anybody who works there shares a sense of joint identity. They formed a unit with a common vision. As in the family unit, there is a parental figure and Brian enacts this role. Honesty and support underpins the relationship within the team. He admitted to being '*a shoulder for people [to cry on]*'. On the other hand, as a leader he felt he often needed to embrace a more directive iden-

tity, when he said: '*but you have to stand firmly, be careful what and how you say, and you have to be able to explain the vision and the work*'. For Brian the responsibility for his 'family' means that he has chosen to concentrate on the development of his company's creative vision and artists.

Guardian

Leaders' commitment to the community of performing artists across Scotland manifests itself through their deep support for talent development. They understood the need for creation of 'seedbeds' (Kelly) or 'rockbeds' (Garry), meaning creation of opportunities for new artistic productions. Leaders clearly perceived their work as a service to the artists and creative workers in the sector, which continuously required them to be champions, curators and facilitators. Being a good leader thus also meant to be sensitive to the needs of artists and be actively engaged in the introduction of critical improvements in the areas of working conditions and career development in the sector. For example, Amber voiced these types of concern very strongly:

> *"You need to pay people properly! A lot of young people now are doing things for free or for the experience, making projects themselves with no money and that's great way to start but it's not sustainable. You can't live like that because otherwise, particularly the older artists will drift away!"*

All cultural leaders agreed to share responsibility for the sustainable development of artists at all stages of their careers. They particularly agreed that finding and nurturing creative talent is essential to the short and long-term success of the sector. Leaders understood that role as two-fold. Firstly, they perceived it to be about influencing and promoting good practices to prevent a loss of creative talent, such as setting safety and quality standards, training frameworks and benchmark for contractual agreements (e.g. minimum payment, sick pay and maternity leave). Secondly, as captured in John's words, the practices of mentoring and advocacy appeared to be an overarching responsibility of all leaders:

> *"Our role is to champion…to develop interesting work internationally, to present work in the rural part of Scotland, where the provision is not great. It's about displaying work in the non-traditional venues, like village halls, schools, leisure centres etc.… and to provide these opportunities but also to help Scottish artists develop their technique and creative skills through workshops and other opportunities that we can provide."*

These two foci of perceived work-role responsibilities of cultural leaders displayed their deep intrinsic motivation and a "greater-than-the-self" or "greater-than-one's-career" type of concerns. Being a good mentor manifested a deep care for the future generations of artists and vitality of the sector. This practice involved a sharing of professional knowledge and expertise, or creating as many opportunities for work and development of artists (their skill-sets and capabilities) as possible, which was believed to be a form of best investment.

Concluding Statement

The findings presented above give grounds for construing a new understanding of cultural leadership and rethinking the merits of their professional role identity and responsibility. Considering cultural leadership as a form of stewardship, with presented here two distinctive roles – "parental figure" and "guardian" - offers a clearer picture of intrinsically motivated cultural stewards devoted to the well-being of arts ecology and its sustainable futures.

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Arts Management Quarterly is published by
Arts Management Network.

A service by
KM Kulturmanagement Network GmbH
Postbox 1198, D-99409 Weimar
Address: Bauhausstr 7 c, D-99423 Weimar
Phone: +49 (0) 3643 / 7402 612
E-Mail: office@artsmanagement.net
CEO: Dirk Schütz
Chief Editor: Kristin Oswald

Mediadata: http://advertising.artsmanagement.net

Layout: Maja Krzanowski
Typesetting: Kristin Oswald

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ISSN 1610-238X